# Service
## unto
# Language and Culture

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**Dr. Palani Arangasamy,**
**Professor of Translation Studies,**
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**Life Sketch of Tamizhavel**
**T.V. Umamaheswaram Pillai**

Karanthai Tamil Sangam,
Thanjavur,
Tamil Nadu, India.
**1995.**

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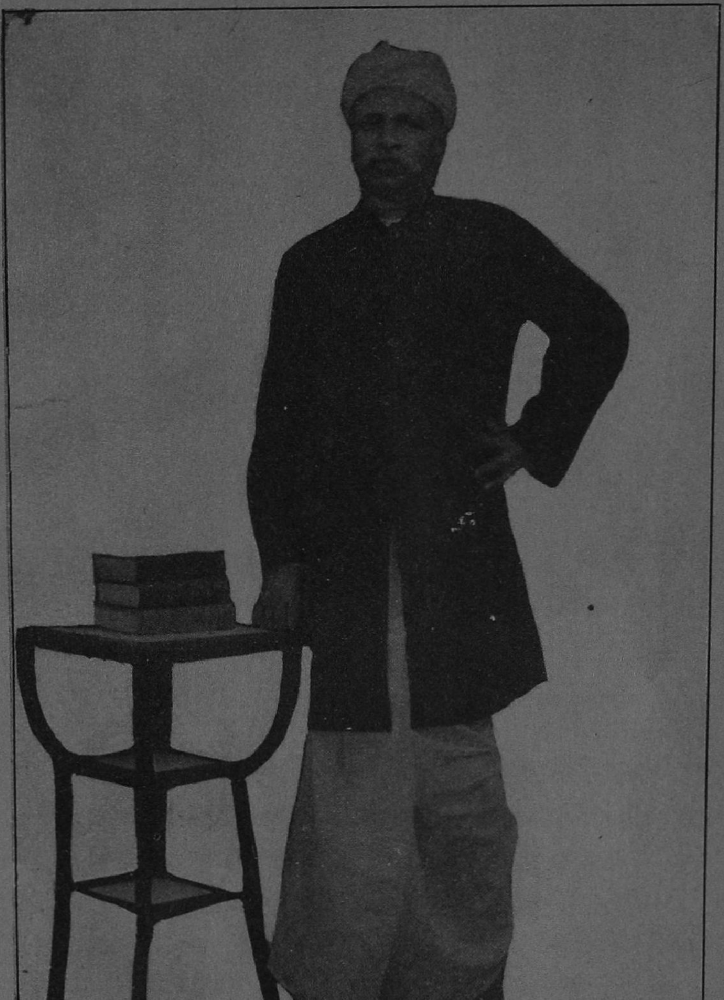
தொகுப்பு ...V..... பக்கம் 319

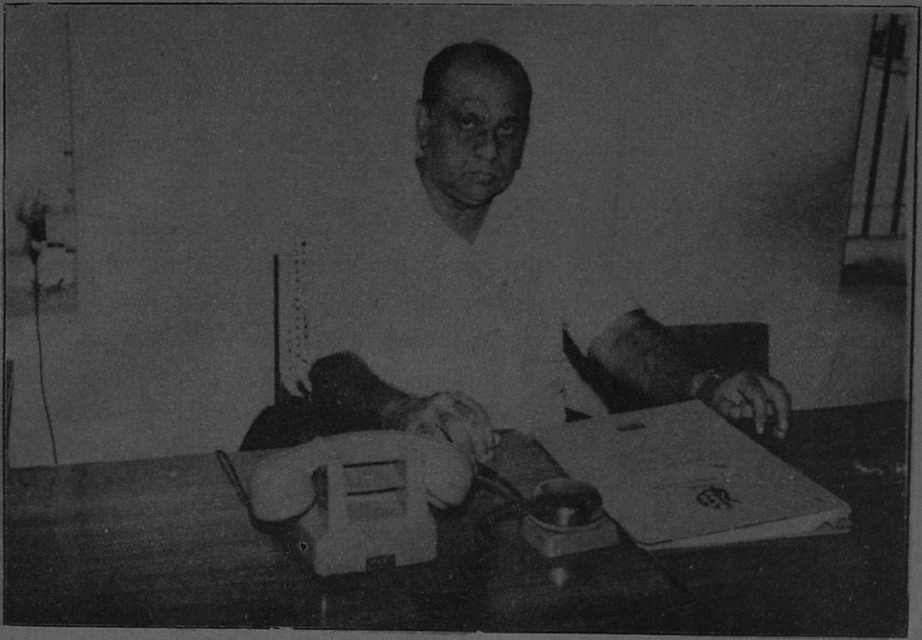
"SANGAM NIRUVIYA THUNGAN"

**T.V. RADHAKRISHNA PILLAI**



"SENTAMIL PURAVALAR"

TAMILAVEL. T.V. UMAMAHESWARAM PILLAI , B.A., B.L.,



"KARANTHAI TAMIL SEMMAL"

THIRU S. RAMANATHAN

## President, Karanthai Tamil Sangam -Since 1983

-Celebrated the centenary of Rathakrishna Pillai, Umamaheshwaran Pillai, Navalar Nattar, Kaviyarasu and Swami Vibulanantha

-Constructed a two-storey building at a cost of Rs.5 lakhs ,with Rs.1 lakh by late Sundaraja Nattar, adjacent to that of A.K. Velan's Building also a bridge across the river replacing an old one.

-Endowed a sum of Rs,10000/for Umamaheswaram Pillai's Annual Birthday Celebration.

-Elevated the Oriental into an Arts College with new courses such as B.Sc, B.Com, Computer Science, etc.

-Founded an Industrial Institute under the aegis of the Palanisamy Pillai Endowment.

# Foreword

With the fond hope of cherishing the revered memory of T.V. Umamaheswaram Pillai, an eloquent lawyer, patron of letters and connoisseur of arts, this booklet has been prepared in record time to coincide with the Eighth World Tamil Conference.

As Founder-President of the Karanthai Tamil Sangam, late Pillai solemnly dedicated his noble services unto the cause of the Sangam and built it by stages until the last breath of his life. The Senatus Academicus nurtured by him was, for a long time a confluence of great scholars and intellectuals. It continues to be so, till date and has been fulfilling the aspirations of its founding fathers. But for his untimely demise on the banks of the holy river Sarayu in the north of India, on an academic visit-cum-pilgrimage, Umamaheswaram Pillai would have converted the sangam into a residential university.

In a way the Tamil University located in the South-western part of Thanjavur is an offshoot of what revered Pillai, roughly five decades ago, dreamt of. The Karanthai Tamil Sangam has, therefore felt it essential to present this profile of its illustrious founder-president to the distinguished delegates and observers who coverged in Thanjavur from lands far-off on the occasion of the Eighth World Tamil conference. If they feel happy that here was a soul wedded to the cause of Tamil even in the heyday of English, I shall feel amply rewarded.

My thanks are due to Prof P. Arangasamy for having prepared this brief life-sketch in about a week's time. Mr. K. Jayakumar has taken care to see it through the Press. Messers Topline printer have kept their word in expediting the printing. I am indebted to them all. I convey my deep debt of gratitude to all the well wishers and members of the Tamil sangam who-co-operate with and instil in me, a courage and perseverance to do what all that is good for the Tamil sangam.

Thanjavur.
20.12.94

S. Ramanathan
President
Karanthai Tamil Sangam.

# Service unto Language and Culture

Granary of the South in India is almost a cliche among those who have heard of the fertility of Thanjavur. This historic city can distinctly claim its chronology roughly from the 7th cent. A.D. onwards. This District town in the state of Tamil Nadu was a capital city for the later chola kings such as Vijayalaya I and his successors including the great RajaRaja. The chola kingdom was so reputed as to be called an Empire under the reign of King Raja Raja and his son Rajendra.The present Thanjavur owes to the suzerainty of these great kings for its ancient geo-physical structure and architectural fame. It is Raja Raja in the zenith of his glory got the reputed Brahadeeswara temple built in the 9th cent A.D. This Shiva temple located in the western part of the Town and its huge monolithic Nanthi, the divine-bull facing the sanctum sanctorum of the shrine, the ruining moat, and the crumbling rampart are all the historic relics that remain to speak not only the glory of the consummate administration of King Raja Raja but also his abiding faith in Saivism and his deep devotion to god.

River Cauvery had been fertilising this land since time immemorial. This glorious river originating in the hillocks of Coorg and embracing the whole of Tamil-Nadu has been referred to, as the lifeline of this land in ancient cankam literature. She is personified variously as the Mother, the Maiden and above all , as the Goddess in Tamil literature. Cauvery's alluvial soil on the river basin continues to be instrumental for a rich harvest of sugarcane, banana, turmeric, ginger and paddy. In and around Thanjavur, therefore agricultural produces were the major commodities. No wonder that Karunthittaikudi, Karanthai in local parlance, a village adjacent to Thanjavur was in the hub of commercial activities and a centre for paddy and rice.

## Parentage and early life

Vaidyalingam Pillai was one of the paddy merchants in Karanthai in the middle of the 19th century. His ancestors had come and settled in Karanthai from a nearby hamlet. His son Vemba Pillai got himself educated and secured a job as a clerk in the Revenue Department of the British India and rose to the level of a Tashildar-a prestigious rank for an Indian to think of, in the heyday of the Britishers. In those pre-independence days, the collectorate of Thanjavur and a well-guarded bungalow, the residential complex of the collector were all in an elevated mound in the sylvan surroundings of Vallam, a small town, half-a- dozen miles west of Thanjavur town. It was in Vallam, Vemba Pillai's first-son was born on 7th of May 1883. Vemba Pillai and his spouse Kamatchi felt elated at the birth of a male babe and took it to be the blessing of God. They thanked the Almighty and named him Umamaheswaran, a name of rich spiritual significance and a term of endearment to Dvaitic and Advaitic Philosophers.

Reminiscence of non-dualism in the name, Umamaheswaran was of one more significance, as his later life proved it-an amalgam of love for language and culture. He was wedded to the cause of Tamil and its culture until the last breath of his life. Who would have dreamt that this boy Umamaheswaran would one-day establish and nurture a Senatus Academicus in his native village with a fond hope of grooming it to be of the stature of Tagore's Visva Bharati at Shantiniketan? Young Umamaheswaran was the eldest of the four children born to Vemba Pillai. Instrumental music, especially the fiddle was Pillai's forte and being a Saivaite, he was also deeply conversant with metaphysical treatises. Ingrained tendencies of his eldest son towards literature, fine-arts, and philosophy were due to this paternal impact, perhaps. Umamaheswaran's elementary education was at Vallam and at Kumbakonam to which place his father, a Revenue sub-ordinate found himself transferred to, subsequently. Fearing that his periodic transfers would hamper the educational progress of his young children, Vemba Pillai put them under the care of Mrs. Periya nayagam, the younger sister of his wife in Karanthai. It was how

young Umamaheswaran came to be a resident of Karanthai. The young boy thereafter got himself admitted to the ninth standard in St.Peter's High School, Thanjavur.

## St. Peter's High School was then a college

St. Peter's High School was then a Jjunior college founded by the Protestant Missionaries in Thanjavur. Rev. G.U. Pope, the famous translator of *Tiruvachagam* was the First principal of the college. German missionary Father Schwartz and a musicologist Vedanayaga Sastriar were the pioneers of Protestantism in this part of Tamil Nadu. A number of orphanages and schools, the Protestants organised and administered. St. Peter's college was their premier academic institution in Thanjavur. Those were the days of teachers singularly wedded themselves to the cause of education and improvement of their wards. Not only the christian missionaries but even others, the laity-teachers were known for their missionary zeal. English language was the medium of instruction even in middle schools. It is on record that a teacher called Tiger Shanmugam Pillai known for his astuteness and scholarship took Umamaheswaran under his personal care and specially coached him in English. Constant reading habit, he is said to have cultivated as a young boy. Added to that, even on Sundays, this good Samaritan teacher from Thanjavur used to walk the distance up to the residence of Umamaheswaran at Karanthai to provide him with exclusive personal tuition in English. It is this solid base that kept young Umamaheswaran in good stead to be extremely clever and extempore in English speeches.

As ill luck would have it, Umamaheswaran during his collegiate career, lost his father. After this untimely demise of his father, he had to be for ever, in the custody of his maternal aunt and her husband Subbaraya pillai, a leading grocery merchant in Karanthai. This endearing couple took every care to see that Umamaheswaran and his younger brothers felt no pangs of separation from their departed parents.

## Short stint in the Collectorate

Young Umamaheswaran obtained his B.A. degree in Economics, surprisingly a prestigious subject in those days, sought after by the talented wards in St.Peter's college, affiliated to Madras University. Perhaps on compassionate grounds due to the death of his father, the District collectorate offered Umamaheswaran the job of a clerk. This subordinate level of being a scribe deservingly of the school-finals must have irked the young graduate, fit enough for better prospects. Moreover, this desk- work in the Collectorate was onerous and it did not suit the scholastic temperament and liberal outlook of this energetic youngman. Belated food-habits caused him abdominal ailments. In the office a casual treatment meted out to him by a bureaucratic Deputy Collector worsened the situation. The young man quit the Collectorate and enrolled himself as a student in the Law College at Madras.

## Law in Practice but love for Tamil

Lawyers in those days were held in high esteem for their integrity, eloquence, independence, and legal acumen. Even though the legal practice was a typical profession, ethics and justice were not totally given up. Either to have the support of or a grip on their clientele, the lawyers were neither unscrupulous nor unethical. Most of them were objective in their trade, scholastic in habit and scrupulous in behaviour.

A lawyer-turned writer Thanjai S. Srinivasam pillai (1852- 1929) has carved a niche for himself in his ***History of Tamil Literature*** by fixing the date of Saint Manichavachagar as of the 8th cent.A.D. after having blasted the research of Swami Vedachalam in this respect. S. Srinivasam Pillai was like a pole-star beckoning Umamaheswaran, the budding lawyer to enroll himself for practising in the local bar. In fact, the young lawyer was for a few years a junior under the elderly Pillai before venturing into the profession independently.

It is said that as a practising lawyer, Umamaheswaram was, enjoying a minimum income of one thousand rupees per month. It must have been a huge sum in those days, keeping in mind the standard value of Indian currency in the twenties

oof the century. He was known for his unimpeachable honesty and integrity in all the three decades of his legal practice. He would not accept any brief that doesn't go well with his conscience and moral codes. What was identical with his mentor Srinivasam was his ardent love towards and abiding scholarship in Tamil. Srinivasam Pillai was not only a scholar but a researcher in History and inscriptions. His well-documented chronological account of Tamil Literature through the ages is worth a reprint nowadays. Such a solid work was not to be seen in Umamaheswaram Pillai is a fact. But Umamaheswaram Pillai's avocations however were multifarious. Social service, administrative work and legal practice were some of the items that snatched away his human hours, leaving a pretty little time for writing. But his scholarship was so deep, eloquent, and sparkling as to call him a veteran speaker. Equally adept he was in organising State-level conference and meetings and that too, to conduct the deliberations in an atmosphere of cordiality and fairness. His intellectual calibre was such as to be a cynosure of great scholars and literates.

Umamaheswaram Pillai's presidential address in one such state-level conference of Tamil held at Tirunelveli in 1934 bear ample testimony to his depth and verve in literature, grammar and phonetics. His hints for coinages and neologisms in increasing vocabulary for science and technology are practical. Justifiable is his aversion to introduce Sanskritized terms for those words that are of Greek and Latin origin. He lashes his fellow-Tamils into provocative thinking that it is of no avail to go on telling that our mother-tongue is woefully inadequate in technical terms and on that score he wouldn't be a party to indiscriminately open the flood-gate of alien vocabulary either.

Revive or make use of suitable words from among those that are already in currency or translate into Tamil, whatever is possible and if both these methods are of no avail, transliterate the term,. he says.

## Championing the cause of Tamil

Pillai has a few valid remarks on the spelling reform in Tamil that scholars have been talking about. Romanization of Tamil alphabet, induction of a

few more letters, deletion of certain letters that are of no functional purpose are a few of the suggestions that are put forth. Pillai is of the view that no such radical steps need be taken. Without disturbing the existing phonetic system, Tamil can prove itself to be effective and viable, he avers. Interesting it is he highlights that English is phonetically a bad language. So was the view of Bernard Shaw as exemplified by him in the introduction to his play **Pygmalion**.. Here follows a ditty which Pillai has quoted in the course of his lecture.

In the English tongue, we speak
Why is 'break' not rhymed with 'freak'?
Will you tell me why it is true,
We say 'sew' but not likewise Jew?
'Beard' sounds not the same as 'heard',
'Cord' is different from 'word';
And since 'Pay' with is rhymed with 'say',
Why not 'paid' with 'said'?
And in short, it seems to me
Sound and letter disagree"

Why should there be a clamour for reforming Tamil when even scholary missionaries like Fr. Constantine Beschi and G.U. Pope have convinced themselves of the present system of spelling, Pillai questions. He regrets that Tamil was not given as much importance as English and Sanskrit are given in the colleges of Madras presidency. So also in Annamalai University, where, he says, some of the syndics are instinctively not in favour of Tamil.

## Politics and Civic Affairs

In the political map of India, next to Indian National congress was the Justice party, originally started as South Indian Liberal Federation in 1916. Along with I.Kumaraswamy and Sir A.T.Panneerselvam, Pillai was a prominent leader of

the Justice party in Thanjavur District. Essentially, it was an active South-Indian movement for uplifting backward non-Brahmins against Brahminical hegemony. It has never been its aim to bring Brahmins down to a lower level. Equal opportunities for all and injustice to none were the watchwords of this newly-founded movement. When this socio-political organisation stepped into the election-fray for civic bodies, Pillai became an elected Taluk -Board president. It was due to his unstinting efforts to help the poor and needy, he continued to be reputed and so, held the office of the President, Taluk Board for a period of about twelve years. During his tenure of office, he personally visited almost all the villages of the sprawling Thanjavur Taluk and fulfilled the civic needs of the rural populace. Laying roads, digging wells, constructing Elementary Schools and establishing local-fund hospitals and dispensaries were some of the important assignments, he took upon to carry out.

## In the Cause of Elementary Education

On the occasion of his assumption of office as Taluk Board President, there were about fifty elementary schools in the whole of Thanjavur Taluk. Taking advantage of the then enacted The Madras Elementary Education Act 1920, Pillai took initiative and opened 170 elementary schools afresh. In a way , an academic movement it was, to dispel illiteracy from the rural masses. In setting right administrative lacuna and also to effect discipline and duty among lackadaisical teachers, he made surprise visits to a number of schools, located in remote villages. No doubt that in his tenure of office as President, lethargic elements were penalised and sincere workers were highly honoured. In places where buildings for the schools could not be constructed on time, built-in and roomy premises were purchased outright. There has already been a couple of secondary schools with boarding and lodging facilities at Orathanadu and Rajamadam. These institutions were run by the Chatram Management with the income from landed properties endowed for the purpose by the Serfoji line of rulers in Thanjavur.

Customarily, Brahmin boys alone were the boarders, taking advantage of a loophole in the rules framed in the days of yore. Poor, indigent and needy non-Brahmin boys, however intelligent they are, were prevented from seeking

admission. Pillai understood this gross injustice perpetrated on the poor boys along communal lines. With the timely help extended by Sir A.T.Panneerselvam, he made the boarding houses open for poor students of all communities. Instead of being blind-folded to worn-out prejudices and die-hard practices that were sustaining under the legal garb, Pillai rose to the occasion and saw to it that hostel facilities were extended to the poor non-Brahmin boys also. Similar reform he carried out in the hostel of an oriental college run by the chatram administration at Thiruvaiyaru. Certainly his legal acumen must have kept him in good stead to do those activities, without offending the rules enforced until then.

## Essential Reform in Sanskrit College

Thiruvaiyaru, a slumbering little town on the banks of the Cauvery has an institution, The Raja's College, located just on the northern banks of the river. The College, a creditable architectural marvel in its present structure, has got three of its narrow and rectangular two-storey halls jutting out like promontories into the river. In its origin, it was an Elementary School for music and Sanskrit and grew by stages into a Sanskrit college. As Sanskrit language had been the prerogative of the higher-ups in the die - hard communal hierarchy, the college and its hostel with free boarding facilities were an educational habitat of the Brahmin-students. Tamil literature and Saivaite hymns were unheard of. Pillai cleverly arranged the dormant - fund of an old and defunct charity to flow into the chatram administration with a provision to teach Tamil Vidwan course and to feed non-Brahmin boys also in the hostel. He renamed it as Raja's College which was until then a Sanskrit college. These wise and timely steps taken by him enabled hundred thousand backward and scheduled caste boys to gain admission, undergo five years of study with boarding facilities and then come out as Tamil scholars from that century-old oriental institution. The present scholarly world therefore is bound to revere the memory of Uma maheswaram Pillai for all these munificent activities. Steps may be taken to perpetuate the memory of this illustrious personality within the precincts of that college at Thiruvaiyaru. Even now, it is not late to commemorate his achievements in the college itself. One must bear in mind that Pillai did nothing against the teaching

oof Sanskrit or the facilities exclusively enjoyed by the Brahmins. The inequality prevailed therein, he has set right. Even now Sanskrit is being taught there and presently this is the only college in Tiruchi University with Sanskrit Major in Post-Graduate classes.This is to reveal that one shouldn't hasten to conclude that Pillai was inimical to any particular community.

## Quranic Teaching

Pillai was conscientious, God-fearing and pious. A Saivaite he was in religious habits. With sacred ash distinctly on his forehead, he would commence his daily chores at home only after prayer in his puja room. He was a Hindu in every respect of the term with no ill-will towards other religions. In a middle school administered by the District Board in muslim-populated Tiruppoonthuruthi, provision had already been made to teach Quran. The salary for that Munshi was met by a private Trust. When the Trust felt it difficult to pay the salary, that Arabic teacher was about to lose his job and the Muslim boys were to deprive themselves of religious learning. Pillai, as Taluk-President felt it better to pay to the Munshi directly from the Board. But it was pointed out to him that there was no statutory provision to teach Quarn in a State run- secular School. As he was a legal expert, he made a resolution to be passed in the Taluk Board to teach Arabic in the school. No bar to teach a language. Thus the legal hurdle was removed and Quranic teaching continued to the happiness and contentment of Muslims. Taking advantage of the existing rules, he could have stopped the Quranic discourse but he was not of that mould to do so. So much was his liberality and dynamism.

In the Tamil month of Chittirai, roughly equivalent to April in every year, it was customary to celebrate a religious festival in Thiruvaiyaru. A group of saiva devotees will bear the presiding deity in a decorated palanquin on their shoulders and customarily offer themselves to visit seven villages adjacent to Thiruvaiyaru to provide dharsan of the Divine Lord to the villagers. Young and old, men and women with abiding faith and unstinted piety used to accompany the Lord in his divine-march, singing hymns from scriptures such as ***Thevaram*** and ***Tiruvachagam***. In this annual feature of spiritual perambulation, Pillai used to take part and walk the

entire distance of about twentyfive miles. It was to him a self-imposed penance which he gladly undertook once in a year. So humble he was and never considered it to be a condescension to walk the distance with all and sundry. To enable the marchers and also the villagers to use it all through the year, he expedited the construction of a bridge across a river near Naakathi village.

As a Municipal Councillor and an active co-operator of Thanjavur, Pillai was instrumental in founding Dravidan co- operative Bank, Land Mortgage Bank and a Co-Operative Printing press at Karanthai. Unmindful of the fact that Mr.Muthukumara Moopanar, once his teacher and then chairman of the Municipality, Pillai fought against him to bring in various facilities and amenities to the public in Thanjavur city. Service to the public was part and parcel of his personality with a tenor of altruism to the core.

More than anything else, what he did for the Karanthai Tamil Sangam was highly significant and already his services have gone into the history of Tamil. It is in the fitness of things that an imposing statue of Pillai is located on the very threshold of the Tamil Sangam premises. In these days of socio-political awareness, one can talk with endearment and sentiments, of one's own tongue. It has now become a fashion among modern poets to sing the glory of Tamil language. But when English and Sanskrit were reigning supreme among the ruling bureaucrats and scholarly personages, Pillai's younger brother Radhakrishnan founded the Tamil Sangam at Karanthai on 14, May 1911. His elder brother Umamaheswaran was unanimously chosen to be the president of the Sangam .

## Karanthai Tamil Sangam

Fad it was among the educated to say that they can talk only in English. Deeply-read oriental scholars basked in the sunshine of classical Sanskrit scholarship. Though an equally ancient classical language, Tamil was almost neglected. The founding of the Karanthai Tamil Sangam took steps to revive its glory by organising periodical literary meets where pure Tamil became the order of the day. Great Tamil scholars like Gnaniyar Swamigal, Pandithamani, U.V.S.Iyer, Raghava Iyengar and

Pasumalai Bharathiyar were invited to address educated and well-informed audiences. The Sangam on the banks of the Vadavar river in Karanthai, thus became the confluence of great Tamil scholars. Roughly a decade earlier, the Tamil Sangam at Madurai had been formulated in 1901 by revered Pandithurai Thevar, the Zamindar of Palavanatham. As ill-luck would have it, it had fallen into the hands of Sanskritized Tamil scholars. Karanthai Tamil Sangam did not fall into a similar adversity. The very object of the Sangam at Karanthai, in all its endeavours was to regenerate, develop and foster Tamil Language and literature. To put into practice what was envisaged, a publication unit was also started. Great Tamil literary works and learned commentaries were copied from cudjan leaves and printed therein. It must be borne in mind that the publication unit of the Sangam was not motivated by pecuniary advantage but by a desire of disseminating the views and news on the heritage of Tamils.

To enable the public to borrow books that are published every now and then and also to browse periodicals and journals, a library was established in March, 1912. Both English and Tamil books worth thousands of rupees were presented to it, by one Pethachi Chettiar of Kaanadukaathan. His personal collection of about eight hundred volumes of books, Umamaheswaran pillai handed over to the library.

A technically-biassed educational institution was founded by Umamaheswaran Pillai on 6, October 1916 along with boarding facilities. An elementary school for orphans and indigent boys was also started along with. It is this miniature educational complex that has grown presently into a Higher-Secondary School named after him and an Arts and Science College with provision for Doctoral research in various aspects of Tamil language and literature. Nearly four thousand students are on the roll presently in all these institutions. A literary monthly ***'Tamil Pozhil'*** started in 1925 with Umamaheswaram Pillai as its patron and chief editor continues without any advertisement. It is being run as a typical literary monthly without compromising its standards. This journal with its scholarly articles on language, literature, history, architecture, philosophy and allied subjects, contributed

by eminent litterateur and researchers is an exclusive literary organ, and gets quoted as authoritative source.

Eminent scholars were on the staff of the Senthamizh college, started on 10 oct, 1938. Most revered and scholarly Gnaniyar Swamigal of Cuddalore graced the inaugural function in the august presence of reputed scholars and elite of society. In fact the occasion was made to coincide with the Silver Jubilee celebrations that had held in Tamil Sangam for three days from the 9th october. Late S. Vellaivaranam was the first Professor to join duty in the college. Pillai invited him from Annamalai University to be on the staff of the college at Karanthai. In succeeding years, this Tamil Sangam college became a confluence of great thinkers and intellectuals. Messers, Venkatasamy Nattar, Kaviyarasu Venkatachlam Pillai, Swami Vibulanantha of Ceylon, Avvai Duraisamy Pillai, Purushothama Naidu from Madras were a few of the great scholars that were on the faculty. Nattar subsequently became a reputed literary Essayist and commentator and Kaviyarasu, an Editor and a poet as well. *Yazh Nool,* a magnum opus on a section of musicology was contributed by Vibulanantha while he was in Karanthai. All these eminent scholars were under the supreme patronage of Umamaheswaram Pillai, the socio- political leader of Thanjavur town.

As an inveterate scholar, Pillai kept himself abreast with current affairs and politics. When the Cambridge Barrister Sir A.T. Panneerselvam was the Principal organiser of the Justice Party in Thanjavur, he was assisted by Umamaheswaram Pillai, Kandasami Moopanar and Venugopal Naidu of Pattukkottai. When Barrister Pannerselvam occupied the Presidential chair of the District Board of Thanjavur more than twice, Umamaheswaram Pillai got himself elected to various units of the local boards. Besides being Taluk Board President, he was a member of the District Board and organiser of the Education committee. It was also due to these various roles and opportunities, Pillai was able to perform his public service in a remarkable manner both in Thanjavur Taluk and its vicinity.

Pillai's priorities were Tamil language and Literature. He used to take ppride in telling that the vocabulary of Tamil was so sound and solid as to lend a few of the words such as rice, ginger and navy to English and Roman languages. This doesn't mean that he was complacent about the vastness of vocabulary and kept himself within an empty smugness. He realised the woeful inadequacy of Tamil words and technical terms in science and technology. Instead of feeling desperate, he wanted experts to go in, for coining words and if possible to translate whether from the existing fund of vocabulary or from the obsolete or archaic words. If either of these are of no avail, the last resort must be to transliterate, he insisted.

## Lover of Reading and Teaching too

Umamaheswaram Pillai felt that there was no time-limit for learning. What Alexander Pope had said, he was conscious of, that little knowledge was a dangerous thing. Hence, whatever he learnt, be literature, language, or philosophy, he aimed at a perfectness in each of these. Regularly on Saturdays, he stepped into the lecture-halls in the College to teach Comparative Grammar and the History of Language to the final year Pulavar students. He professed strict Saivism and on one occasion, got himself initiated into it by Vaalayanantha Swamiji of Koradachery. Saiva canon of religious and didactic literatures such as ***Sivagnana Botham*** and ***Siddhiyar,*** he learnt under the tutelage of the Swamiji. His thirst for knowledge reminds ourselves of what Tennyson had said that "Knowledge is like a sinking star Beyond the utmost bound of human thought". His love for Tamil knew no bounds.

Not merely an ardent and passionate lover of Tamil, but Pillai was also strong enough to rise on occasions to advocate and safeguard the interests of Tamil language. In 1937, Hindi was introduced on an experimental basis sporadically in a few schools in Tamil Nadu. Besides, the Government began to threaten that Government employees would be deprived of their jobs if they did not learn Hindi. This resulted in a virulent campaign against Hindi. The Justice party leaders opposed the introduction of Hindi tooth and nail within and without the legislative Assembly. Umamaheswaram Pillai helped the local organisers to register their protest to the

Government that no language, especially Hindi need be imposed. Did what all help he could render to an Anti-Hindi team that proceeded to Madras from Pattukkottai under the leadership of Mr. Alagirisamy. He walked along with the campaigners and bade them farewell at Ayyampettai. Then he was an outstanding lawyer at Thanjavur.

Lawyers who practised even in the courts must have been strong in English in the British days. The argument, advocacy and verdict were all in English. Even now the vestiges of olden days are sometimes perceptible in the law courts but woeful degeneracy has crept into the standard of English with their ridiculous cockney and colloquial English. When the demands were exacting and an argumentative power was the core of the day, Umamaheswaram Pillai, as pointed out earlier was netting a minimum of one thousand rupees per month in Thanjavur, a small city. He was thorough in English, both in scholarship and speech.

## Bi-lingual eloquence

For many persons to-day, condemnation of English is a synonym of their love towards Tamil. Those who can't make up in English and a certain few who are monolinguals come under this category. Under this group of proliferation of pseudo-lovers of Tamil, Pillai cannot be categorised. His love towards Tamil was immaculate and he drank it to the lees. His knowledge in English was equally remarkable. At times, he proved his eloquence even in speeches that were made extempore. Once Sir Arthur Hope, the then Governor of Madras visited Thanjavur. A civic reception was accorded to him in the Ramanathan chettiar Hall. As the Governor was said to be a fast speaker, nobody came forward to translate his speech. But Pillai stood up and rendered the whole English speech, in its order into Tamil without omitting even the articulations and gestures. A tremendous applause that followed was indicative of a tribute to his memory, eloquence and knowledge.

His outstanding proficiency in English has not made him an anglophile and a vassal to that alien tongue. In every walk of life, both academic and official, he wanted importance to be given to Tamil. Since 1913, until his death, he had

been reiterating that Tamil must be made the medium of instruction even at the University level. As a member of the Senate and Syndicate, Annamalai University, he saw to it that a resolution was passed that the title Pulavar instead of Vidwan, a Sanskrit term, be conferred on the students after their four-year study of Tamil language and Literature. As a fitting recognition to their scholarship in Tamil, these oriental title-holders must be appointed as Headmasters, he suggested. Even in colleges, the salary for Tamil teachers was roughly one half of what his Sanskrit and English counterparts were receiving elsewhere and also in Presidency college Madras. Pillai boldly pointed out this glaring discrepancy and pleaded for parity of scales of pay for all teachers. It is heartening to note that these aims which were visions and dreams in those days gradually getting fulfilled nowadays are indicative of Umamaheswaram Pillai's forethought, initiative and perseverance.

Innumerable literary gatherings, conferences, colloquies and meetings all over the State of Tamilnadu,he presided over and participated as a speaker. As his knowledge in Saiva Siddhantha was immense, he took active part in those deliberations also. In 1940 when Madras Tamil Association conferred the title *'Kavimani'* on poet Desika Vinayagam Pillai, it was Umamaheswaram Pillai who presided over the function and paid encomiums to him. It was customary of this versatile scholar to arrange literary meetings at Karanthai to which eminent scholars like Maraimalai Adigal, Thiru. Vi.Ka. and Pandithamani were invited. It was considered to be a prestige to be invited for literary discourses by the Karanthai Tamil Sangam in those days. A mere invitation even to a colloquy arranged in Karanthai was deemed to be a great honour bestowed on the invitees. The status of Karanthai was thus elevated among all the centres of Tamil learning by Umamaheswaram Pillai.

Until the late twenties, the job of a Tamil pundit was offered to those who were certified of their proficiency by any traditional scholar of reputation. This conservative method of recognising one's own talents was not proper and not regulated. Moreover, in individual cases, the scholarship was not found organised and methodical. Enough room was there for even quacks to creep into the service.

In setting right these anamolies, Pillai has arranged for a Board of Studies Tamil in Madras University for the first time in the early thirties. Prof. K. Namasivaya *Mudaliyar framed the syllabus and thenceforward the Tamil Vidwan course became* organised and uniformed in all the oriental colleges. A timely work in the cause of Tamil learning thus was planned and executed with forethought and perseverance by Umamaheswaram Pillai.

## Titles Conferred

As an appreciation for all the selfless services of Umamaheswaram Pillai in the cause of Tamil, the great Sanskrit and Tamil scholar, the most Revered Gnaniyar Swamigal of Cuddalore, on the eve of his sixtieth birthday conferred on Pillai a title ***Senthamizh Puravalar***, 'the patron of classical Tamil' in 1933. The Government of Madras, as a token of appreciation of Pillai's services in public welfare activities presented him with a citation, a silver medallion along with the conferment of a title, ***Rao Bhagadur*** in 1935. When the Silver Jubilee celebrations were conducted in the educational complex of the Tamil Sangam, Pillai was honoured with a title ***Thamizhavel***, chieftain of Tamil in 1938.

In aspiring for the cause of promoting education, Umamaheswarm Pillai wanted importance to be given to technical education and practice. His love for language and literature has not prevented him from realising the importance of technical education. In fact, the very first academic institution that was founded under the aegis of the Sangam on 6,October 1916 was an amalgam of both literary and technical subjects. That was an auspicious Vijayadasami day in which any new venture would normally be started. Pillai's friend, a scholar of eminence in Tamil, English and Sanskrit and a great patron of language, Mr. Raghunatha Rajaliyar of Haridwaramangalam inaugurated that school. But somehow or other, the technical side of curricula was given up, perhaps to be on the regular line of educational set-up according to the norms of the Government. However it is that school that has presently bloomed into various institutions such as Rathakrishna Elementary School, Umamaheswaran Higher-Secondary School and Tamizhavel Umamaheswaranar Karanthi Arts College with Post-Graduate and research facilities. A sprawling area

subsequently purchased just on the banks of the Vadavar river, proved to be an ideal campus to establish all these institutions in one and the same complex.

## Envisaging a university

Pillai does not seem to have been contented with a few educational institutions he founded at Karanthai along with his brother Rathakrishna Pillai. He was envisaging a University at Thanjavur with the sole aim of pursuing not merely conventional academic studies but also research in archaeology, sculpture, drama, folklore and Siddha medicine.

Active efforts to establish it were undertaken by him with the support of the then Education Minister Mr. Sivagnanam Pillai. Around 1925 when his genuine efforts to start a university at Thanjavur was about to bear fruits, Rajah Sir Annamalai Chettiar obtained the concurrence of the Government of Madras to start a university on the outskirts of Chidambaram town with the sole aim of developing Tamil and Music. But for that intervention, the Tamil University as per the ideals of Pillai would have been started, at least half-a-century earlier.

However it is heartening to note that if not when he was alive, at least a few decades after, what had been dreamt of by Umamaheswaram Pillai in the days of yore became true, when the former Chief Minister Hon'ble M.G. Ramachandran established in 1981, the Tamil University which is at present a full-fledged statutorily recognised institution on par with other universities in India.

## Academic tour-cum-pilgrimage

As regards Karanthai educational complex, Pillai was subsequently planning to develop it on the pattern of Viswabharati University founded by Rabindranath Tagore at Shantiniketan in West Bengal. He wanted to visit that august institution perhaps to emulate its infrastructure in the educational complex in his native place. Being pious and God-fearing, he availed of this opportunity to make a pilgrimage also to a number of holy shrines en route. Sometime in April 1941, he started his journey to the North of India, accompained by his friend A. Ganapathy Pillai. His itinerary included not only Hindu shrines but also places related to Lord

Buddha such as BodhGaya, Saranath and at length Calcutta. After a few days' stay at Calcutta, Pillai was journeying to Allahabad with the intention of going to Haridwar. Unfortunately he fell ill at Ayodya. He was running temperature and an immediate medical care and attention had to be paid. Pillai was admitted to Qureshi Nursing Home, a private hospital at Faizabad. Despite necessary precaution and medication, Pillai the patron of Tamil breathed his last at 3.30 P.M. on Friday, the 9th May, 1941. With inconsolable grief and terrible shock, his friend Ganapathy Pillai paid his last respects to the departed soul in that far-off place. The mortal remains of Uamamaheswaram Pillai, the great Tamil scholar and connoisseur of Arts and culture was consigned to flames on the holy banks of the river Sarayu. Bereft of his beloved friend, Ganapathy Pillai had to come home only with his fond memories of the departed soul.

## Tributes to the departed soul

On the occasion of the obsequious ceremony at Karanthai on the 26th of May 1941, the great patrons and pundits have gathered and paid their tributes and encomiums to the revered memory of Umamaheswaram Pillai. Elegiac songs written for the occasion were movingly recited by Vidwan Ulagavoozhian of Salem Municipal College. The Tamil Sangam College declared holiday as a token of its deep debt of gratitude and respect to the memory of its founder.

Pillai was the most respected of all the personages who were responsible for founding the educational complex at Karanthai. As a man, he was known for his orderliness, discipline, promptness and perseverance. Daily after ablutions in the early morning, he would sit for prayer, reciting hymns from **Thevaram, Tiruvacakam** and **Arutpa**. So humble and unassuming, he was. A horse-drawn carriage, he had arranged for him to go to the court and collectorate. If the appointed jutkawallah doesn't present himself at his home on time, Pillai himself would walk towards the hackney cart-stand and make the jutkawallah tacitly realise that he ought to have been punctual thereafter.

Even though he was in need of money for building up the Sangam and other allied institutions in a phased manner, he never sought financial assistance from anybody. Those that came voluntarily were taken in. His brother-in-law Sambasivam Pillai, an Engineer used to assist him both financially and technically. One or two occasions were there when he politely declined to accept the pecuniary assistance of those who were notorious for their ill-gotten wealth. Frugal he was, in spending and in a way what Shakespeare said, that 'Neither be a borrower nor a lender be' had been a guiding principle in his life. If anybody insists for a loan from him, he would not relent. If that request becomes pestering, he would lend it but will never ask it back.

## Traits of Character

Promptness and punctuality he always insisted in every walk of life. Dr. Subbarayan, the then Chief Minister of Madras had been invited to a literary function at Karanthai. He came far behind the schedule and had to subject himself to the wrath of Pillai. Without mincing words, Pillai angrily reacted to his late arrival and commenced the proceedings. Pillai's sartorial elegance was impressive. As he was one of the local leaders, a social figure and a legal luminary,he wore a close-necked, long-buttoned, full-sleeved and collarless coat with a dignified head- gear resembling a cap. Spotless white dhothi below his waist, he would wear, as if it is a panchakaccham. Thick and laced shoes would don his feet invariably when he goes out on official work. Tall and erect he was with a majestic look with full-grown moustache. His eloquence in English and close association with westernised officials and friends have not deterred him from being deeply religious and pious. Despite his partial westernised semblance with coat,shoes etc, he was never found without sacred ash on his forehead. Simplicity was the core of his personality as he was allergic to anything pseudo. Unless provoked, he was a person of suavity.

Besides God-fearing and conscientious, Umamaheswaram Pillai was a man of integrity. With no habits of any sort, he was governed by unexcelling morality. When he was thirty years of his age, his wife Ulaganayaki passed away leaving behind three little sons. Her untimely demise was an irreparable loss to him. Wordly wise

relatives and intimate friends persuaded him to marry again. This proposal, Pillai flatly refused and said when the virtuous code is for a widow to remain as such, how can it be otherwise for a widower? It is said that thereafter, he never looked at mirrors as a means of beautifying himself.

Pillai bore no ill-will towards anybody. Even in ideological rivalry or in election-eve dissensions, he never harboured any constant personal enmity. On rare occasions, he would shout at offenders but with no offensive words. That angry mood however, would vanish in no time like lightning.

## Malice towards none

Peramboor Nallamuthu Nattar was pitted against Umamaheswaram Pillai in the Taluk Board Election. Though Nattar was defeated, Pillai used to respect him with courtesy and affection. On another occasion, Pillai was a candidate of the Justice party. But his own brother-in-law Sambasivam Pillai, being a congress sympathiser worked for Mr. Poovaraga Iyengar, the congress candidate. At home, both the Pillais would sit and dine together. Next moment, they would leave the home to look after the election work in different areas. Umamaheswaram Pillai never took to heart the electioneering work of his brother-in-law in the congress wing. Once a cheap edition of the first canto of ***Cilappatikaram*** was printed on behalf of the Karanthai Tamil Sangam. U.V. Swaminatha Iyer issued a lawyer's notice that Pillai has violated the copyright rules. Iyer's edition of the epic was on sale then. However a reply was sent to him that his complaint would be met duly in the court of law. Luckily, there had been an old edition of that epic available for Pillai. U.V.S. Iyer did not proceed the case. A few years afterwards, when he was the chief guest in a literary function, Pillai welcomed him with open arms and made him feel at home in the educational complex of the Tamil Sangam. Such was his inherent quality of courtesy, amicability and humbleness.

## Image to emulate

Imbued with a genuine love for Tamil, he worked for the development of Tamil Sangam institutions until the last breath of his life. Though a widower even

at an early age of 30, he remained unmarried resisting the persuasion of relatives to a remarriage, and taking care of his young children with maternal care and love. HHonesty and integrity were the watchwords for him in his public life. Even though he was holding responsible and powerful offices in the Taluk and District level, he had never been power-drunk and bureaucratic. Down to earth practical he was, with the public welfare in mind. If only he had thought, he could have amassed fabulous wealth. He never dreamt of such stigmatised pelf. Even for improving educational institutions, on charitable grounds, he never aspired to secure financial help by questionable means. Till date, because of all these veritable gem-like qualities, he is alive in the minds of his votaries and revered. He is like a pole-star twinkling on the horizon, beckoning all of us to emulate him to do what is good and noble to mankind on the whole. An imposing statue of Umamaheswaram Pillai, in front of the educational complex of Karanthai Tamil Sangam is a token of our humble tribute in honour of his revered and cherished memory. He is like a colossus and we walk under his huge principles:

In an ambitious attempt to glorify the exalted memory of Umamaheswaram Pillai, let me be apologetic to Shakespere again in the following lines.

***He was in general, of honest thought***
***and did all to common good;***
***His life was gentle and the elements***
***so mixt in him,***
***that Nature might stand up***
***And say to all the world,***
***'This was a man!'***

Let us follow him with all respects and rights of honour.

# KARANTHAI TAMIL SANGAM

Founder-president Umamaheswaram Pillai is no more with us. Bu dreams and visions continue to get fulfilled with the philonthropy and munifi of well-wishers and general public.

Karanthai Tamil Sangam is a Registered Body under the India.. Registration Act xxi of 1860 and it members elect the President once in three years to administer various educational institutions. Its objects include the services to work for the cause of Tamil and to maintain charitable institutions. Following is the honour roil of the Presidents of Tamil Sangam.

1. Tamizhavel. T.V. Umamaheswaram Pillai, B.A. B.L
2. Thiru: I. Kumarasamy Pillai
3. Thiru. A.Y. Arulanandasamy Nadar
4. Thiru. S. Swayamprakasam B.A. B.L.
5. Thiru. S. Dhanakodi B.A.
6. Thiru. S. Pethannan.
7. Thiru. S. Natarajan.
8. Thiru. S. Ramanathan.

## List of Educational Institutions:

1. Nursery School
2. Rathakrishna Elementary School
3. Umamaheswara Higher-Secondary School
4. Tamizaavel Umamaheswaranar Karanthai Arts College
5. Palanisamy Pillai Charities Technical Institute(I.T.I.)
6. An orphanage

## List of Periodicals

1. Tamil Pozhil, a literary monthly
2. Tamil Sangam Ceithi Malar(News Bulletin in Tamil)

Dr. Palani. Arangasamy, (1936) alumnus of Dharmapuram Oriental college (1953-57) and Annamalai University(1957-61) where he had studied M.A. in English, was recipient of prizes and awards in oratorical and essay-writing contests. Since 1962, he has been teaching English in First Grade colleges and subsequently for nearly two-decades in Madurai University(1972-89). Presently he is professor and Head, Department of Translation, Tamil University. His publication s, numbering twelve include a Pioneering book on ***Journalism in Tamil*** and a biography of ***Mother Teresa*** which are prescribed in many universities in the south of India. Two of the publications of Tamil University - ***Life and Works of Bharathidasan,*** the first of its kind in English and ***The origin of Tamil Drama*** are his recent contributions. His translation ***Guru Nanak, Kerala Varma*** are of the Sahitya Academy. He is a member of the Regional Board, National Book Trust, New Delhi. ***Shakespeare i*** ***version-An Appraisal*** is his latest an in-depth analysis of all the Translations of the English playwright. ***Gitagovindam*** in Tamil in print. Current Affairs, Human Rights and child Labour are a his other areas of interest.

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